On a livestream performance by the New York Philharmonic; an organ concert by Raymond Nagem at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine; a concert of piano music by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center; the National Youth Orchestra; and The Barber of Seville with Teatro Nuovo.

I attended a concert at Carnegie Hall on March 6, 2020. It was a chamber concert, featuring the trio of Emanuel Ax (piano), Leonidas Kavakos (violin), and Yo-Yo Ma (cello). At intermission, a friend of mine introduced me to an executive of the hall. When I extended my hand, he put both of his up in the air. “We’re not doing that now,” he said. I knew we were in a new world. I thought it would last—some weeks.

I next stepped into a concert hall a year and three months later: on June 4, 2021. The hall was not Carnegie but Daniel Recital Hall, at Converse College, in Spartanburg, South Carolina. I heard a guitar recital played by a young friend of mine, Nathaniel Hill. He was graduating from high school, and this was his senior recital. It also happened to be his birthday. In the lobby was a fabulous cake, shaped like a guitar. Nate’s parents, Chip and Karen, are old friends of mine. They are musicians, and so are their three boys. (Nathaniel was preceded by Gabriel, who was preceded by Stephen.)

For the last year and a half, I have written about livestreams—performances streamed over the internet—and recordings. Livestreams, like recordings, have their pleasures. I have received mail that goes as follows: “You must miss concert halls and opera houses, but I love being able to watch performances from all over the world, sitting in my living room.” So do I. And can this not continue, when the world is up and running again? We have seen a lot of livestreams with empty concert halls. But one can stream with full ones, can one not?
New York began to open up, a little, last spring. First out of the blocks, to my knowledge, was the 92nd Street Y. They offered what they called a “tasting menu” of musical performances, with a limited audience—150, in a hall that seats close to a thousand. A friend of mine wrote me, “We heard our first live concert yesterday since the start of the pandemic. Anthony McGill played the ‘Arpeggione’ beautifully, and it brought tears to my eyes. The audience was very moved, too.” McGill is a clarinetist—the principal player of the New York Philharmonic, as well as a soloist—and “Arpeggione” is a designation for Schubert’s Sonata in A minor, D. 821.

I thought I would have a chronicle of live performances for you this month. For example, I was to attend a Philharmonic concert on July 8—outdoors, at Lincoln Center, in Damrosch Park (just south of the Metropolitan Opera House). The main work on the program was to be Mozart’s Symphony No. 40 in G minor. But the concert was rained out. This is a hazard of music en plein air.

All was not lost, however, as the Philharmonic offered a livestream—recorded some months before. (Can a “livestream” be on tape, rather than live? This is a question that may induce a headache.) This program too featured a big Mozart work, or at least a long one: the Serenade No. 10 in B flat, for winds, known as the “Gran Partita.” But the concert began with Lyric for Strings, by George Walker. He referred to it as “the Lyric.” How do I know this? Because I knew the composer, in the last years of his life.

Born in 1922, George Walker died in 2018, when he was ninety-six. He wrote Lyric for Strings in 1946. It is his best-known work. The Lyric is an orchestral version of the slow movement of Walker’s String Quartet No. 1. You may remember that Samuel Barber’s Adagio for Strings comes from that composer’s own string quartet (the only one he wrote, unless you count Dover Beach, for string quartet and baritone). Both Barber and Walker, as it happens, went to the Curtis Institute, where they studied with Rosario Scalero. In any case, George bristled when people compared Lyric for Strings with the Adagio. “They’re nothing alike!” Well, they both belong to a category, I would say, and they both are wonderful.

In addition to calling it “the Lyric,” George referred to Lyric for Strings as “my grandmother’s piece.” He dedicated it to her. Malvina King lived with George and his family in Washington, D.C. She lived to a great old age; her grandson knew her well. She was a former slave. She had had two husbands. The first, she lost when he was sold at auction. The second had died. Malvina King never, ever talked about slavery. When George pestered her for a word on the subject—any word—she spoke one sentence, only: “They did everything except eat us.”

Whether the Lyric will become a permanent part of the repertory, no one can know. I wouldn’t bet against it. The New York Philharmonic, under Jaap van Zweden, its music director, played it nicely, although I would have liked more warmth. Can you judge warmth, sitting in your living room with your laptop? Maybe not.
After the Walker came Shostakovich: his Concerto No. 1 in C minor for piano, trumpet, and strings. The piano soloist was Yefim Bronfman, a great Shostakovich player (and a great player overall). In the late 1990s, Bronfman made a superb recording of Shostakovich’s Piano Concerto No. 2 with Esa-Pekka Salonen and the Los Angeles Philharmonic. I once told him that I admired this concerto very much and wished that I could hear it more often. He said he agreed—but orchestras were always requesting the first concerto, not the second.

Shostakovich wrote six concertos: two for piano, two for violin, and two for cello. In each case—each pair—No. 1 is the more popular. But we should not overlook the second concertos, especially the one for piano.

In any event, the Concerto No. 1 is a fine piece, and a strange one (like No. 2, actually, and like any number of Shostakovich pieces). It is wacky and serious; “classical” and “popular”; unexpectedly virtuosic in spots. With the New York Philharmonic, Bronfman played his part in masterly fashion. He had sure fingers and sure understanding. Among his qualities was an acute sense of rhythm, vital for this piece. The conductor, Van Zweden, had the same.

The trumpet soloist was the Philharmonic’s principal, Christopher Martin. What a beautiful sound he makes: a singing sound. He also has the ability to play loud and bright without blaring. A first-rate orchestra ought to have a first-rate trumpeter, and the Philharmonic does. (More than one, probably.)

How about the Mozart, the Serenade No. 10 in B flat, for all those winds? It was good to hear the winds, front and center. The strings usually have pride of place. Van Zweden conducted the piece with Mozartean expertise—with elegance, precision, and vigor. But I must say this, as someone who worships the ground Mozart walks on, as we all do: I’m not sure that Mozart ever intended his serenades and divertimentos to be played in concert halls, as audiences listened, still and quiet. I think they are meant to be music you hear while strolling around, at a party, en plein air. Now and then, the serenades and divertimentos are difficult sits. I know that many agree with me, though usually in whispers.

But even now, I am listening to the “Gran Partita,” as I write, and I must add: it is Mozart. Which is to say, it’s chock-full of genius.

Of all the instruments there are, the organ is probably the one that comes through least well via livestreams, or on recordings, for that matter. There’s nothing like being in the hall, the
church, or the cathedral. Sometimes an organ literally shakes your nerves and rattles your brain (as Jerry Lee Lewis once sang). But then, what about the human voice? Yes, a voice gives you just one musical line, in contrast with all the manuals, pedals, bells, and whistles of an organ. A voice should record or “stream” easily. But there is nothing like being in the presence of a human voice (meaning, a really good one).

Recordability or streamability aside, I have heard some very good, very satisfying organ recitals via livestreams—and some of them have come from Raymond Nagem, who works at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. The cathedral has offered a series, online, called “Tuesdays at 6”—that would be 6 p.m., rather than a.m. Nagem has been a fixture on this series. One advantage of an organ video is, you can see the player’s footwork, which can be impressive.

As a rule, Nagem has presented programs mixing old and new, familiar and unfamiliar. Bach has been a staple, naturally, and blessedly. One recital began with a piece by David Hurd, an American born in 1950. The piece is Partita on “Detroit”—which does not have to do with the largest city in my home state of Michigan. “Detroit” is the name of a hymn, composed by William Bradshaw in about 1820. The hymn is known by many as “Forgive Our Sins as We Forgive.” Hurd’s partita is austere and arresting, going with the hymn. It holds a listener’s attention—which may seem a weak criterion, but is actually very strong, in my book.

As Nagem played the partita, I thought, “Sounds more like variations than a partita.” One is used to thinking of a partita as a suite of dances, à la Bach. But one definition of “partita” is, in fact, “variations.”

After a couple of Bach chorale preludes, Nagem played a piece by Trevor Weston, an American born in 1967. This is Pools of Living Water. Would you think of such pools if you weren’t steered by the title? No, but this is the case with almost all “program music” (music intended to convey something concrete or specific). And Weston obviously had an inspiration, and a good, efficacious one.

Raymond Nagem ended this particular “Tuesday at 6” with John Philip Sousa: an arrangement of The Washington Post March. Talk about bells and whistles, and fun. Part of the greatness of the organ is its versatility.

The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center has been streaming concerts from the Frederick R. Koch Foundation Townhouse. Fred Koch was a Koch brother, but not a Koch brother, if you know what I mean. Charles and David ran the company (Koch Industries); Fred and William were estranged. I knew Fred slightly. He was a patron of the arts, as was David (whose name is on a theater at Lincoln Center). Though Fred was a New Yorker, by way of Wichita, Harvard, the U.S. Navy, and Yale, I knew him chiefly through the Salzburg Festival. He owned a castle about thirty-five miles south of Salzburg, Blühnbach, it’s called. It was once the hunting castle of Franz Ferdinand. Then it belonged to Gustav Krupp, the steel magnate (who was tried at Nuremberg). Fred Koch was a gracious host at Blühnbach, and a superb guide to it.
He was rather shy, Fred was. At gatherings, he would stand or sit off to the side. But when you engaged him, he was bright and lively. He was not just a benefactor of the arts: he knew them, and books and other things. I imagine his life was not easy, no matter his millions, or billions. That family estrangement was severe. When I made this point at the time of Fred’s death, in February 2020, a reader replied, “Sometimes very different apples fall from the same tree.” A wise observation.

From the New York townhouse, the Chamber Music Society presented a concert of piano music—for two hands and four. The hands belonged to Wu Han and Gilles Vonsattel. This program was all-French, beginning with Louise Farrenc (1804–75). Suddenly, Farrenc is everywhere. She is almost as ubiquitous on programs as Beethoven. Composers and their music rise and fall like hemlines.

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Gilles Vonsattel played Farrenc’s *Air russe varié*, a skillful piece requiring a skillful pianist—which Vonsattel certainly is. He demonstrated his usual good fingers and good sense. For her part, Wu Han played three pieces—*Trois Morceaux*—by Lili Boulanger. Lili, you may remember, was the younger sister of Nadia, the composer and famed teacher of composition. Lili died at age twenty-four. She left an impressive body of work, or a tragic one, in that it shows what the composer could have gone on to do. Lifespans are funny: when Lili was born, her father, Ernest, also a composer, was seventy-seven. The *Trois Morceaux* are intelligent, neat, dear, and beautiful pieces, and Wu Han played them that way.

**Carnegie Hall organizes and sponsors youth ensembles, including the grandly named National Youth Orchestra of the United States of America. For short, the orchestra is known as nyo–usa. It is open to players from ages sixteen to nineteen. There is a junior varsity, so to speak: nyo2. It is open to players from fourteen to seventeen. The orchestras gather for three weeks of training; then they play a concert. This year, the concert took place, not in Carnegie Hall, but at Purchase College, in Westchester County, north of the city.**

*nyo–usa* was conducted by Carlos Miguel Prieto, a Mexican, who studied at Princeton University and—this could come in handy, in the music industry—Harvard Business School. He conducted in the standard black Mao shirt. The orchestra’s attire included shocking red pants—a refreshing touch. They played one piece, and a big one: Tchaikovsky’s Symphony No. 6 in B minor, “Pathétique.”
Sitting in my living room, with my laptop, listening to this livestream, I typed some notes. “Confident bassoon.” “Confident horn.” “Confident oboe.” I could have gone on. These kids were amazingly confident. Is it because they are kids, unhindered by adult baggage? The orchestra as a whole played with remarkable poise and maturity—and musicality. Maestro Prieto led them surehandedly. I looked at the players’ faces and I listened to their playing. The two did not quite match. I dare say, if you were handed an audio recording of this performance, rather than a video, you would not know you were listening to a youth orchestra.

nyo2 was impressive in its own way: remember, the players were as young as fourteen. They, too, were ably led, by Mei-Ann Chen, a Taiwanese American. They played two pieces, beginning with a famous Hindemith work: *Symphonic Metamorphosis of Themes by Carl Maria von Weber*. I say “famous.” But is it really, anymore? It used to be. I believe the *Symphonic Metamorphosis* is a piece whose hemline has fallen. It was good to see it rise again, in Purchase. The orchestra also played a work by Florence Price, the Chicago composer, born in Little Rock, who lived from 1887 to 1953. Like Louise Farrenc, she is suddenly ubiquitous. I wrote about her at some length in this magazine’s September 2020 issue.

The piece played by the youth orchestra was *Ethiopia’s Shadow in America*, which Price composed in 1932. It is in three parts: “The Arrival of the Negro in America when first brought here as a slave” (Introduction and Allegretto); “His Resignation and Faith” (Andante); and “His Adaptation—a fusion of his native and acquired impulses” (Allegro). The piece is thoroughly—I would say touchingly—American.

You want live? I got live—at last. Teatro Nuovo put on a concert performance of *The Barber of Seville* (Rossini) in the aforementioned Damrosch Park—next to the Metropolitan Opera House. No rain, on this particular evening. I have said “live,” yes—but was it live-er than the livestreams? Was the sound truer? You heard the orchestra through speakers—maybe just one speaker—and you heard the singers through their mics. They had sticks next to their mouths, as on Broadway. But it pays not to be picky in this straitened era.

Capo of Teatro Nuovo is Will Crutchfield, a talented, versatile fellow. He is a conductor, a musicologist, a voice coach, etc. In the 1980s, he was a critic for *The New York Times*. William F. Buckley Jr. had him on *Firing Line*—where Crutchfield helped wfb question Yehudi Menuhin. A standout in the cast for *The Barber* was Hannah Ludwig, an American mezzo-soprano singing Rosina. She is not to be confused with Hanna Ludwig, a German mezzo from the twentieth century. Some of the orchestra’s playing was rough and ready; some of the singing was without crispness or flair. But when is this not the case? High spirits governed this high-spirited opera, which lifted the spirits of the audience, too. I believe I could tell.
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His podcast with The New Criterion, titled “Music for a While,” can be found here.

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